

Written in white: a reading of Kevin Hart's 'Colloquies'

Nathan Lyons

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In the late twelfth century Rabbi Isaac the Blind raised an intriguing question about the origins of the Torah.¹ If Torah existed before creation as Proverbs 8 teaches, but there was nothing yet created on which it might be written, then on what surface was the eternal Torah eternally inscribed? Rabbi Isaac answers his riddle by distinguishing two manifestations of Torah, one oral and one written. The Oral Torah

is the hue of a black fire on white fire, which is the Written Torah. Now the forms of the letters are not vowelized nor are they shaped except through the power of black, which is like ink. So too the Written Torah is unformed in a physical image, except through the power of the Oral Torah. That is to say, one cannot be explained fully without the other.²

An actual scroll of scripture will present both kinds of Torah to its reader but, counter-intuitively, it is oral Torah that is conveyed visibly in the ink, whereas the primordial white of written Torah is glimpsed only invisibly in the unmarked spaces of the parchment, literally between the lines. Rabbi Isaac goes on to say that only the prophets were 'able to perceive this splendor' of the written Torah and only Moses 'viewed it or united with it' because, like the sun, it blinds lesser eyes that try to look on it for too long. For the rest of us, reading Torah means dealing with the obscure

mediation of black ink and black fire. The truth of the primordial Written Torah remains a secret written in white, glimpsed only for a moment beneath, behind, and between the inscriptions of its own revelation.

1. The book of scripture

Rabbi Isaac's peculiar notion of divine white writing is the best place, I suggest, to begin reading 'Colloquies', a recent poem by Australian poet, philosopher and theologian, Kevin Hart, published in his 2011 volume *Morning Knowledge*.³ The poem is rich and subtle, and takes the form of a prayer to God, whom Hart's addresses under the apophatically-inclined name 'Dark One'. It proceeds in ten movements, each constituted by four unrhymed quatrains. The whole poem can be construed as an elaboration of Rabbi Isaac's idea across a much wider frame—indeed, Hart finds in the Rabbi the kernel of a whole phenomenology of life lived with God. Though Hart's debt to Rabbi Isaac is largely inexplicit in the text, the fourth movement brings it very near to the surface, and it is here that I begin our exposition of the poem. Hart writes:

I talk to you
And all my words black out
You talk to me
In words like morning snow

There are no words,
Dark One, no words at all
I read your book
But you compose in white

These stanzas show the poet at prayer, speaking and listening. The task of prayerful communication is not completed, however; it is piecemeal, difficult, and uncertain. The poet's words 'black out' as though faint and weak, too dark to see. God's words, on the other hand, are too bright to see, like the blinding glare of sunlight on snow. There is speech, but communication is so tenuous that it seems there are 'no words at all'. Hart's explanation of the hermeneutic dilemma in play here clearly echoes Rabbi Isaac's: 'you compose in white'.⁴ God's book is full of inscriptions in black, but the fullness of this text is found only in truer words lying behind them, white words hidden in plain sight. The ten movements of 'Colloquies' are a telling of how the poet keeps reading, praying, and living when his correspondent, this Dark One, writes in white.

Another stanza in the fourth movement amplifies the theme of communicative failure that is implicit in Rabbi Isaac's idea. The poet languishes before the biblical text:

There are no words
Dark One, no words at all
Just these black marks
These stretched and knotted sounds

The true words of written Torah are here unforthcoming. The poet receives only scribbles and sounds, the 'black marks' of the Rabbi's oral Torah, which fail to

convey the divine speech they seem to promise. This failure of speech extends further. The poet finds it also in his own creaturely speech, whether mundane conversations or poems set down on paper. Hart explores the suggestion in his second and ninth movements. He—and all of us—grope for language, searching through a primordial pool of words that are ‘waiting for a light’, but we produce only ‘the ash of words’. We speak, but ‘names fall away / From things’ so that the referents of our words become ‘strange things’. It is as though we are all Adam naming the creatures, only to discover that the grand cultural project of speech and semiosis finally leaves us at a loss, playing with scrawls and noises.

Behind this failure of Adamic speech is the same opacity that Rabbi Isaac finds in the text of scripture. At the end of all linguistic trails, whether creaturely or divine, lies that most elusive word, the name of Dark One. This is ‘the darkest word’ that ‘waits beneath the rest / The word that no one can say’, and it is the original *ur*-speech of creation: ‘everything / Begins with just one word / From you, Dark One, / Even if it’s not said’. Language makes things meaningful but it also estranges us from the world, for Dark One ‘hides in words / And makes things stranger still’. Dark One is ‘the strangest one of all’, and we, as creatures made in his strange image, find ‘ourselves most strange of all’.

‘Colloquies’ thus gives us the quintessential poet’s lament: a lament for language. Language seems so promising, so vast in its referential reach, yet it is forever

inadequate to its task of naming the world, let alone naming God. We speak, God speaks, and yet there are no words. The white fire of meaning hides elusively behind the black ink of the text. But in the fourth movement 'Colloquies' also gives us the quintessential poet's petition, a prayer for a blessing on the unblessed text.

So you must come
And brood upon my page
And warm those words
Until fine cracks appear

God is invoked here as a hen warming her eggs, recalling G. M. Hopkins' great, brooding bird: 'the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.'⁵ Hopkins waits for the hatching of the world and the brightness of resurrection; Hart waits for the hatching of the text and the brightness of white words. The poet invokes Dark One specifically over 'my page', alluding firstly to the pages of scripture, and then also to his own poetry, those words that are 'waiting for a light'.

2. The book of nature

Rabbi Isaac's theory of white writing is clearly in play then in Hart's treatment of scripture and language. But a reading of 'Colloquies' in these terms can be pressed further, I think. The poet complains that in Dark One's book 'You talk to me / In words like morning snow'. Drawing this particular simile between divine speech and the phenomenon of fallen snow serves to widen the sense of 'book' here to

include the old theological trope of God's *two* books: the book of Scripture and the book of Nature. This pairing is not foreign to Rabbi Isaac. The inscriptions of Torah, he says, exist 'prior to any action', prior to creation, and it is from this primordial text that the physical cosmos emanates. The natural world is itself therefore a strange kind of script, one that was 'destined to change from potentiality to actuality' and so 'render permanent the foundations of the world from this very inscription'.⁶ Hart's poem develops this theme—cosmos as speech, world as sign, nature as a book to be read—so that the paradox of white writing is encountered again in the book of nature.

Hart probes a range of natural phenomena in pursuit of speech beneath or behind them. We have already noted the snow. In the third movement the poet inquires of the rain. 'What comes with it, / This rain, fine almond rain'?

Perhaps a chill
 From somewhere in the sky
 Where birds won't go
 And sunlight pricks like ice

Perhaps a thrill
 From somewhere in vast dark
 That sunlight hides
 That makes the mind recoil

The poet senses a trace of something—'a chill', 'a thrill'—that is borne in the movements of the weather. He confronts this something again, and more explicitly, in the fifth movement.

Don't speak, Dark One,
 You never do, you know
 I'm better off
 Just listening to clouds

Here nature, like scripture, is met first with semiotic skepticism. There are no signs here. But as we turn to the second quatrain, and then the third and fourth, the language and rhythm slow, softening the poet's abrupt complaint (almost the complaint of a quarrelling lover) and opening surprising possibilities of intimate recognition. The image of clouds, originally raised as a bitter joke, is gently personified:

Even if they
 Look quick and slope away
 Even if they
 Harangue me with thick rain

Or whisper "Come"
 When I am at my desk
 That I might hear
 Whole overtures of snow

By nature's coercion and seduction the poet's complaint is turned to contemplation. The words of the world are heard in the wintry weather, and the poet discerns Dark One's white speech echoing in the snow and wind 'as once it did / When there was just we two'.

Another instance of natural speech is the poet's observation of a winter storm around his house in the sixth movement. He attends first to the ice: 'Dark is the crack / Inside that icicle'. Then the wind: 'A tapeworm void / Inside the wind's raw howl'.

Then living things:

The tree that bends
Over a threatened house
The hunger of cats
Grown wild beneath the house

Hart aims in each instance at the interior of things: crack in the ice, void in the wind, stress in the tree, fear in the house, hunger in the cats. The next stanzas express a desire to somehow know this interior.

*To be that crack
And know the thrill of ice
To be the tree
That strikes and means no harm*

*And so to turn
The moment's heavy lock
And know the dark
And eyes that cut through bone*

The use of italics here—the only italics in ‘Colloquies’—marks a shift in register from the conversational speech of prayer to a narration of what we might call phenomenological sympathy. Hart’s method here, philosophically speaking, is clearly indebted to Husserl. But his theological debt here to G. M. Hopkins is even more significant. As Hart notes in an essay, for Hopkins ‘revelation is given on the inside, as it were, and it is the poet’s task to read things from within – *intus legere* – and so to encounter the divine by way of inscape.’¹⁷ Hart’s sympathetic (with the full etymological resonances of that word) observations of the icicle, the wind, the tree, the cat are precisely an effort of *intus legere*, of reading inside things. But whereas

Hopkins' inscapes reveal 'the dearest freshness deep down things',⁸ Hart's *intus legere* traces the deepest *cracks* in things. This repetition and modification of Hopkins' theme serves to highlight the moral and aesthetic ambiguity of nature, since the divine presence traced in the interior of elemental, vegetal, and animal things is tied to the primordial threat, hunger, and pain of nature. To 'turn / The moment's heavy lock' is to read this dark interior of natural things (to 'know the dark') and to find there a paradoxical trace of God's good gift of creation where it would otherwise seem wholly absent—paradoxical precisely in the way of white writing hidden between lines of black text. By joining Hopkins to Rabbi Isaac in this way, 'Colloquies' transfigures natural theology just as it has transfigured biblical revelation.

Hart's theological apprehension of nature goes further, however. The poet finds in the icicle the same 'thrill', and in the space under the house the same 'dark', that he earlier sensed arriving with the rain: 'a thrill / From somewhere in vast dark / That sunlight hides.' There is a continuity then between the interiors of particular things and the interior of the whole existing cosmos—that 'vast dark... that makes the mind recoil'—and Dark One is found as much in the vastness ('up above / In those old rings of light') as in the minutiae ('deep inside' the poet's self like a wind that 'rushes through each vein'). The poet suggests in the eighth movement, however, that the divine presence exceeds even this immense continuum of space and time:

I look for you
 In every crack of is
 And scrape away
 Each pleasure that you give

From a crack of ice to every ‘crack of is’: with this pun the poet extends his *intus legere* beyond all particular things and sets of things toward the fullness of being itself. In Heideggerian terms this is a move from the ontic to the ontological. Or even better, in the Thomist terms that Hart increasingly favours in his theological work, the *ice-is* pun constitutes a move from particular *ens* to *esse*, from individual beings to, ultimately, that unrestricted act of existence which gives being to all beings through participation—the *ipsum esse subsistens*, or God.⁹ The poet traces the interior of all existence, seeking there Dark One who sustains all things from the inside *magis intimum and profundius*, most intimately and deeply, and who is found, as Aquinas says, ‘more closely united to each thing than the thing is to itself.’¹⁰

Hart argues in an essay on Hopkins that a life lived *coram deo* is exposed to new possibilities for reading the natural world: ‘*intus legere* becomes a species of *lectio divina*.’¹¹ This is exactly what we witness in ‘Colloquies’: the reading of scripture’s white writing continues in the reading of nature. It is therefore no coincidence that the natural images in ‘Colloquies’ are consistently white and wintry—even the ‘summer days’ in the third movement are haunted by ‘chill’ and ‘sunlight that pricks like ice’. The book of nature is also just as perplexing as the book of scripture: ‘The whole thing’s mad’ declares the poet, ‘And don’t you say it’s not’. And so the

reader's prayer must be repeated over the book of nature. 'Come... and warm those words until fine cracks appear' becomes a prayer also for cracks in ice and is. This theme is developed in the seventh movement, where the poet considers a falling snowflake and senses that it somehow falls 'through a prayer to you',

Because I know
That you would make it sing
In notes I'd hear
Only alone with you

This is a prayer to *hear* Dark One's white writing inscribed on the inside of the world. The poet prays for Dark One to speak in nature a word 'like morning snow', to crack the snowflake and release its white song.

3. *The book of time*

I think that there is one more mode of white writing to be found in 'Colloquies' in addition to the traditional pair of scripture and nature. The remaining three stanzas of the movement we have just been considering (the seventh) point us to it:

A snowflake falls
On a gray evening
In Arkansas
And falls through all of time

It's falling too
Inside the book I read
Inside my fear
And through a prayer to you [...]

It's falling now

And falling for all time
 Into a print
 Of that fierce limping cat

The poet performs here the same act of phenomenological attention to a natural item that we have noted already. However in this instance it is not nature but *time* that is brought into view. The passage of the snowflake is a passage through the ‘now’ and the ‘all’ of time, and the images of natural and cultural life are presented as so many moments in the poet’s own life—that is, the poet’s history, the poet’s time. As Dark One’s revelation may be found in nature’s snow fall or scripture’s text, so also may it be found in the time of one’s own life, in vocations, fears, and prayers, or ‘deep inside / My feelings thoughts and loves’ (eighth movement), or in the passage from youth to age (first movement), or in memories of ‘when there was just we two’ (fifth movement).

Returning to the snowflake, we see that its fall proceeds in sibilant, lullaby tones until the mood is abruptly broken when the snowflake lands on the footprint of ‘that fierce limping cat’. The starving cat (whom we also met earlier) functions in ‘Colloquies’ as a symbol of suffering, and it is the reminder of suffering in its print that silences the revelatory song of the snowflake. This—the problem of suffering—is what makes it difficult to discern Dark One’s speech in the passage of time and history, his third book. Hart confronts this hermeneutic difficulty directly in the poem’s remarkable final movement.

It's hard, Dark One,
 A single day is hard
 (Even the Good
 Casts shadows after noon)

I feel the sun
 I listen to the rain
 But something's lost
 And is forever lost

Don't ask, Dark One,
 Don't ask me what it is
 Don't ask for me
 To look the other way

I wake and look
 I wake and look for you
 (Even the Good
 Casts shadows before noon)

Dark One is figured here in Platonic terms as 'the Good'—the origin of all things which is transcendent 'beyond being', as Plato says in the *Republic* VI—while the suffering that makes the poet's days 'hard' is figured as shadows. The two parenthetical comments that frame the movement make the strange claim that it is the Good itself which casts these shadows. Thus the tenth movement presses the question of suffering upon us in a poignant formulation: what can it mean to say that the Good God—which Athens teaches is plenitudinous and perfect light, whom Jerusalem teaches is without shadow of turning—casts a shadow?

The first parenthetical remark—that the Good casts shadows after noon—echoes the disillusioned analyses of human life given by Qohelet and Job. Here under the sun

life is 'vanity and vexation of spirit' (Ecc. 1:14). Hart refers in his second stanza to the pleasure of sunshine and the music of rain, and by implication the prosperity that these agrarian cycles sustain, but these pleasures cannot satisfy in a life that fades like mist. There is inevitably loss in such a life, and it 'is forever lost'. In the context of the *Morning Knowledge* collection, which was written during the time of Hart's father's death, this loss refers first to the poet's father, but it alludes also to the many losses endured in a life under the sun.¹² The poet refuses to simply move on and 'look the other way', and his parenthetical remark assigns responsibility for these losses with the Good: the days are so hard and full of shadows that even the Good, who claims to be shadowless, seems to cast a shadow. It is an echo of Job's cry: 'When I looked for good, then evil came unto me: and when I waited for light, there came darkness' (Job 29:26). In the first stanza, the shadows of the Good are a figure of grief, protest, and accusation; a cry that Dark One 'hath set darkness in my paths' (Job 19:8).

However, this movement has the structural and rhetorical form of a typical Hebrew lament psalm, and so despair is not the final word. To see how this is so we must first consider St. Augustine's contrast of evening and morning knowledge, a theme so significant for the collection of poems in which 'Colloquies' is published that Hart features it in both his title (*Morning Knowledge*) and epigraph. Augustine, in his reading of the Genesis creation account, suggests that the cycles from evening to morning signify the process by which angels apprehend creation.¹³ The angels first

see and know a created thing, including themselves, in terms 'of its own proper nature, of its not being what God is'. This is to know 'the facts' about a created thing: it belongs to this genera and that species; it has this or that form. Augustine calls this evening knowledge. It moves in 'a kind of twilight' and sees 'we might say, in faded colours.' But of course in the Genesis text evening is followed by morning, and this is 'because the knowledge angels have does not remain fixed in a creature without their immediately referring it to the praise and love of Him in whom they know not the fact, but the reason, of its creation.' This is morning knowledge: to see creation 'in the Wisdom of God, in that art, as it were, by which it was created'.

The final stanza of Hart's tenth movement states that the Good casts shadows not after noon, as in the first stanza, but *before* noon. With this quiet substitution of a single word Hart takes Augustine's theory of morning knowledge for his own, and develops it in a new key. The movement echoes the rhythms of the Genesis narrative—it was evening, it was morning; shadows after noon, shadows before noon—but Hart's rendition does not begin 'in the beginning' with the angelic hosts; it begins in the middle, here in our 'hard' post-lapsarian days. In Hart's rendition, then, evening and morning knowledge is not properly about being, as the angelic knowledge is. It is about *history*. The poet's 'single day' is not a pre-historical day of creation; it is a quotidian day, twenty four hours under Qohelet's sun, and subsequently a figure for all the days of fallen history. Modulating morning knowledge from being to history in this way means that the shadows ascribed to

Dark One are not ontological, as though creation is an occlusion of the Good, but instead historical: darkness cast in fallen time, pains felt in the passing of days under the sun. In Hart's rendering then, morning knowledge means understanding how one's personal history, one's biography, could possibly be, in Augustine's phrase, 'referred to the praise and love' of God, when our days can be so hard.

Hart's extension of the angels' morning knowledge to human knowers has precedent in the theological tradition. Aquinas, commenting on Augustine, observes that 'knowledge of the Creator through creatures... is evening knowledge, just as, conversely, knowledge of creatures through the Creator is morning knowledge'.¹⁴ Later John of the Cross explicitly appropriates this summary of angelic cognition for the human soul: 'here lies the remarkable delight of this awakening: The soul knows creatures through God and not God through creatures. This amounts to knowing the effects through their cause and not the cause through its effects.'¹⁵ Hart's poem modifies John's formula into a temporal mode so that, roughly speaking, 'creatures' are replaced by 'a creature's time'. In the evening the poet sees the shadows of suffering cast in history and joins Job's lament that the Good who casts them appears to be in fact not good: God is seen in the light of history's shadows. But in the morning the poet's seeing runs the other way: history's shadows are seen in the light of God. Hart thus shows what Augustine's theory of angelic knowledge can mean for creatures like us, made from the dust: evening knowledge knows God through time, and trembles; morning knowledge knows time through God, and hopes.

All this is not, I think, an attempt at theodicy. In the evening the poet insists, 'Don't ask for me / To look the other way', and Dark One never does. The next two lines are delicately written: 'I wake and look / I wake and look for you'. The first line is almost a question (I wake and look *for what?*) and the second line answers it: 'I look for you', a reply that echoes the psalmist's 'in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up' (Psa. 5:3). The break between Hart's two lines marks the moment of conversion from mourning to morning knowledge. But this conversion is not achieved by looking away from the shadows in order to transcend or rationalise them, as theodicy perhaps requires. It is rather, as the last two lines of the poem confirm, to stay with the shadows, but to see them now 'through the Creator', as shadows *of the Good*. Morning knowledge sees, as Hart says elsewhere, how 'love suffuses all that had been made' and how everything, including suffering, is 'linked by love to the Creator'.¹⁶ The pain and uncertainty of lament lingers in the poet—as it does in all lives—but his vision of the shadows has been converted to see them in the morning light of love.

This account of time and suffering is akin to that suggested by Rowan Williams in a recent poem titled, appropriately enough, 'Augustine'.¹⁷ Williams imagines God encouraging the bishop of Hippo to write his *Confessions*—that is, to read again in memory the narrative of his life and to discern the hidden work of grace in it. 'Take up / your shadow', Augustine is told, 'Take up your voice / and tell your shadow's

story', for 'this shadow / is my shape for you'. The shadow figure does not function identically in each case, but by it both Williams and Hart name the same Augustinian task of tracing the grace of the Good in the perplexity of one's personal history. The time of one's life is haunted by black shadows of suffering, but in morning knowledge these can be received as somehow 'my shape for you', as somehow shadows of grace—as somehow, we might say, *white* shadows.

In his tenth movement then, Hart takes a remarkable array of philosophical and religious traditions and weaves them into a single subtle figure, the shadows of the Good, and this figure constitutes a third mode of Dark One's white speech, one written in the book of time, history, and biography. 'Colloquies' begins and ends with meditations on this third mode. In the opening movement the poet kneels in corporate liturgy and observes the 'many men' who kneel with him; some young, some old. These are the poet's many selves over time ('when I stand / Those men and boys are one') and the man 'who turns and looks away' in the first movement is the same one who, in the final movement, turns 'to look for you'. Bookending 'Colloquies' with these scenes implies the priority of the book of time. The arrangement suggests that prayer with Dark One is always done in the wider context of a life lived in time and that, in return, the meaning of that life's time will only be understood through the labour of prayer. Thus, while the poet, exasperated with Dark One's silence, at one point announces that 'there's no time for time', he is taught his error in the telling of his own poem. 'Colloquies' teaches that there is

always time for time, for our life is nothing other than time; it teaches that we must take our time with time, for only in the slow passage from evening to morning can we learn to read the book of time.

Conclusion

Hart gives to this poem the title ‘Colloquies’, a word that means roughly ‘conversations’. Historically the term has named such things as official gatherings of theologians to discuss doctrinal controversies, or the often amusing dialogues that Erasmus put together to teach Renaissance schoolboys their Latin.¹⁸ Hart’s colloquies are like neither of these. His colloquies lie instead in the tradition of Jesuit spiritual exercises, and in this context the colloquy has a particular function. According to Ignatius of Loyola, master of this tradition,

The Colloquy is made, properly speaking, as one friend speaks to another, or as a servant to his master; now asking some grace, now blaming oneself for some misdeed, now communicating one’s affairs, and asking advice in them.¹⁹

This Ignatian inheritance is the final theme to be highlighted in our reading of Hart’s poem. I have argued that ‘Colloquies’ may be fruitfully read as a poetic elaboration of Rabbi Isaac the Blind’s contention that when he speaks, God speaks in white writing between and behind the black inscriptions of scripture. Hart’s Dark One composes in white, and Hart extends the pages of divine composition to include three books: scripture, nature, and time. In each book the poet seeks the white

writing and in each case needs a hermeneutic grace: the written text is a dead letter and its inscriptions must be warmed and cracked; nature's speech is hidden in dark interiors and must be made to sing; the days of a life are shadowed by suffering and morning knowledge must be granted to perceive God's love in time.

Hart's appropriation of the Ignatian tradition accounts for the peculiar tone that unifies the poem's approach to these three books. No matter which of the books is in question, the poet's discourse is suffused with a mood of frustration, sarcasm, and perplexity. This echoes Rabbi Isaac's conviction that reading Torah is an ordeal so demanding that its trauma will persist until the reader 'calms down and rests nearly an hour or two'.²⁰ Yet for Hart clearly weds this spiritual difficulty to a deep and lingering sense of intimacy and familiarity, as between a friend and friend. In this way, just as with Hopkins, Aquinas, and Augustine, Hart uses Rabbi Isaac's idea to repeat and transfigure Ignatius. Taken as whole, 'Colloquies' is then a spiritual exercise in the Ignatian style, transformed by the Rabbi's paradox. It is a colloquy, a colloquy written in white.²¹

NOTES

¹ See Rabbi Isaac's commentary on Midrash Kohen, known under the modern title "The Mystical Torah—Kabbalistic Creation," in *The Early Kabbalah*, ed. Joseph Dan, trans. Ronald C. Kiener (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 73–79.

² Ibid., 75–6.

³ Kevin Hart, *Morning Knowledge* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 12–21. A version of the poem was earlier published in *Meanjin* 66, no. 1 (2007): 67–71. The poem has been treated in several studies and reviews—see: Lachlan Brown, "Seeing a Shadow, Speaking a Name, Listening for Silence: Reading the Poetry of Kevin Hart" (PhD, University of Sydney, 2009), 28–30; Toby Davidson, "Beyond Reach of Language: Kevin Hart and Christian Mysticism," *Literature and Theology* (2010); Henry Hart, "Prayerful Reading and Writing," *Sewanee Review* 121, no. 2 (2013): xxvi–xxx; Geoff Page, "Insistence on the Mystical," *The Canberra Times*, July 9, 2011; Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, "Review Essay: Ordinary Glory: The Art of Breaking Bread with the Dead, Epiphanies, Morning Knowledge, Reading God's Handwriting," *Christianity & Literature* 63, no. 1 (2013): 105–120; Toby Davidson, *Christian Mysticism and Australian Poetry* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2013), 203–15; Natalie Jeane Owen-Jones, "Relating Experience: Spiritual Practice and the Poetry of Judith Beveridge, Kevin Hart, Robert Gray and Michael Heald" (PhD, University of Queensland, 2014), 87–90.

⁴ Hart has also treated Rabbi Isaac's idea outside his poetry, though only briefly—see Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 176–7; "The Counter-Spiritual Life," in *The Power of Contestation: Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot*, ed. Kevin Hart and Geoffrey Hartman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 174–5; *Postmodernism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2004), 100–1. Hart is led to Rabbi Isaac by some elliptical comments in Maurice Blanchot's *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 430–1.

⁵ See G. M. Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur'. Hopkins himself alludes to Milton's *Paradise Lost* I: 'Thou from the first / Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread / Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss / And mad'st it pregnant'.

⁶ Rabbi Isaac the Blind, "The Mystical Torah," 73–4.

⁷ Kevin Hart, "Poetry and Revelation: Hopkins, Counter-Experience and Reductio," *Pacifica* 18 (2005): 277.

⁸ G.M. Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur'.

⁹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 11, art. 4 co., in *The Summa Theologica*, ed. Daniel J. Sullivan, trans. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province (William Benton: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952). Hart said of Aquinas in 2006 that 'I have a taste for his way of thinking' ("On Faith," *Meanjin* 65, no. 4 (2006): 3). The growth of this taste for Thomas over Hart's career is nicely indicated by the contrast between Hart's original (1989) and later supplementary (2000) accounts of Aquinas' onto-theological guilt in *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000). According to the former, Aquinas 'propounds one of the strongest possible statements of theology as onto-theology' (255); in the latter Hart says 'I doubt that Saint Thomas developed his theology in any simple or straightforward sense along the lines of onto-theology' (xxi). Indeed, Hart writes in 2014 that for the question God and being 'it is *only* with Thomas Aquinas that we get a satisfying sense of what is at issue' ("Theology without Metaphysics?," in *Groundless Gods: The Theological Prospects of Post-Metaphysical Thought*, ed. Hartmut von Sass and Eric E. Hall (Wipf and Stock, 2014), 44, my emphasis).

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 8, art. 1 co., and *De Veritate* q. 8, art. 16, ad. 12, in *Truth*, trans. Robert W. Mulligan, vol. 1: Questions 1–9 (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

¹¹ Kevin Hart, "Poetry and Revelation: Hopkins, Counter-Experience and Reductio," *Pacifica* 18 (2005): 280.

¹² Hart dedicates the volume to the memory of his father. For some biographical details around the writing of *Morning Knowledge*, see Pradeep Chaswal, "An E-Interview with Kevin Hart," *The Muse* 1, no. 2 (2011), available at [http://themuse.webs.com/bookreview %20dec2011/An%20E-Interview%20with%20Kevin%20Hart.htm](http://themuse.webs.com/bookreview%20dec2011/An%20E-Interview%20with%20Kevin%20Hart.htm) (accessed 15/01/2015).

¹³ Augustine treats this theme in many places, but I quote in this paragraph from *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1984) XI, 7, and *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, vol. 1 (New York: Paulist Press, 1983) IV, 22–25. Hart quotes the latter in his epigraph to *Morning Knowledge*. Hart discusses the importance of the theme for this particular volume in Chaswal, "An E-Interview with Kevin Hart".

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate* q. 8, art. 16, ad. 9, in *Truth*, 1: Questions 1–9:402.

¹⁵ John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, 4.5, in Otilio Rodriguez and Kieran Kavanaugh, trans., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (USA: Doubleday, 1964), 645. I was led to this historical connection through conversation with Mark Wynn of

the University of Leeds.

¹⁶ Chaswal, "An E-Interview with Kevin Hart".

¹⁷ Published in Rowan Williams, *The Poems of Rowan Williams* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2014), 32–3. I was led to this comparison through an elegant paper by Luke Steven of the University of Cambridge, "Augustine in the Garden of Eden: Confessions VIII 7.16-12.30," forthcoming.

¹⁸ See Craig R. Thompson, trans., *Colloquies*, 2 vols., *Collected Works of Desiderius Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

¹⁹ Elder Mullan, trans., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola* (New York: Cosimo Books, 2007), 39.

²⁰ Rabbi Isaac the Blind, "The Mystical Torah," 76.

²¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented at the "Addressing the Sacred through Literature and the Arts" conference, 2-3 August 2013, at the Australian Catholic University, Strathfield, NSW. My thanks to Kevin Hart for his comments on this earlier version.